A photograph of a family walking away from the camera on a dirt path through a lush green forest. The path is lined with white flowers on the left and dense green bushes on the right. The trees are tall and leafy, creating a canopy overhead. The overall scene is bright and natural.

A new leaf

Words by Hilary Robertson
Photographs by Chris Tubbs

WHILE SUE PHILIPS WAS PREPARING FOR MOTHERHOOD, HER HUSBAND PIERS TAYLOR WAS CONTEMPLATING A PROJECT OF A VERY DIFFERENT KIND: TURNING A TINY WOODLAND BUILDING, 300M FROM THE NEAREST ROAD, INTO THEIR FAMILY HOME



HOUSE IN THE WOODS

WHO IS HE?

After an Arts Foundation course, Piers worked as a builder in London. He was a 'mature student' of 22 when he discovered his vocation as an architect and trained in Sydney and the AA in London. He completed his masters degree at Bath University where he now teaches. He set up his practice Piers Taylor Architect (01225 852 456) in 2004.



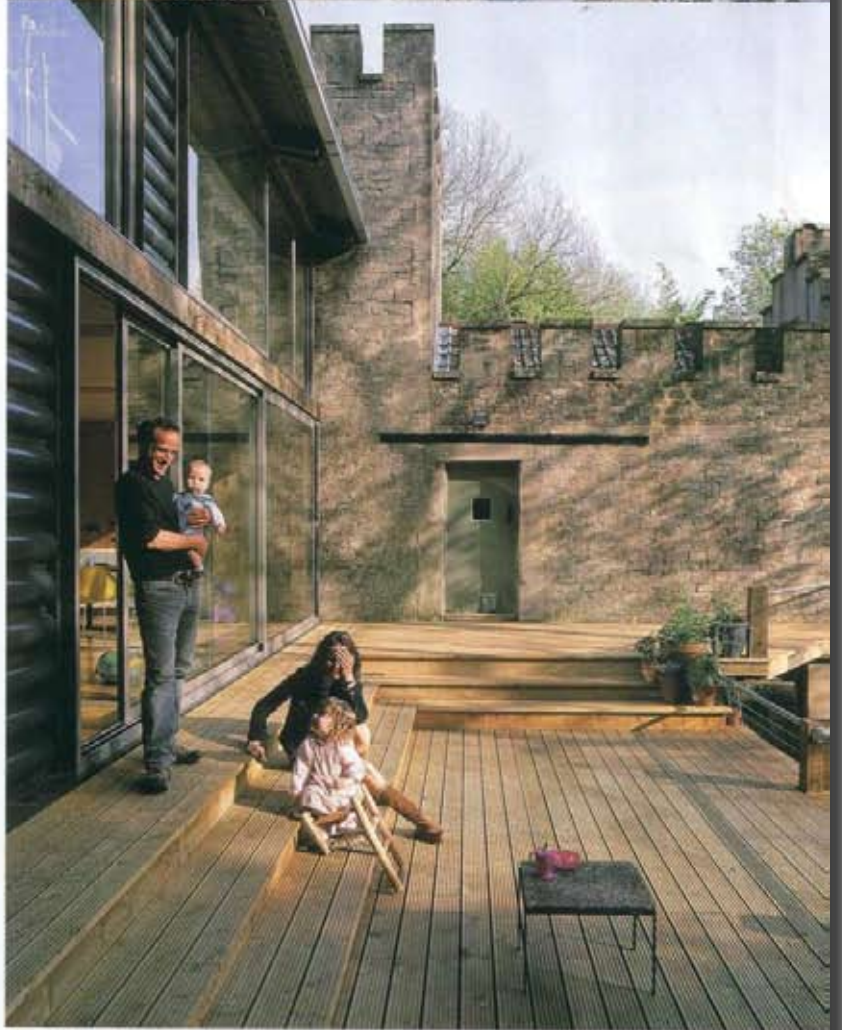


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oonshine is one of those houses that isn't easily found. It's unlikely that Piers Taylor and Sue Philips are ever bothered by door-to-door salesmen. The narrow woodland path, 300m from car to gate, is intriguing, a fairy-tale entrance. The journey whets the appetite for something unusual, hidden – a folly, a gingerbread house or a castle, perhaps? After a steep slope, and the mystery of the approach, the answer is finally revealed: this is no gingerbread house, but it is a kind of a castle – an up-to-the-minute transparent box attached to a diminutive, castellated house.

There's no need to ask why architect Piers chose this site – the evidence is all around: the ancient woodlands, the silence only broken by birdsong and a restful rustling of leaves, the wraparound view of a rolling green valley. But it does seem extraordinary that he and the family – Sue, Lily, 3, Archie, 7 months, and Immy, 14 – are not simply weekenders. It's astonishing that a family with busy lives are based here seven days a week, managing the transition from sylvan paradise to metropolitan life in nearby Bath with the aid of a lot of patience and a wheelbarrow (for journeys that require luggage). But then architects do have a tendency to take on projects that would frighten mere mortals, and sometimes even their own wives.

Piers and Sue had heard about the eccentric collection of castellated houses from friends but, initially had not considered it an option. In fact, Sue, pregnant with their first child, was expecting to go ahead with a scheme to extend their end-of-terrace house. Then Piers spotted an ad for the woodland house in a local newspaper. No one was prepared to take on the property due to the limited access. He visited alone (Sue was preoccupied with their five-day-old baby) and was so excited about the location that he made an offer on the spot. Sue gave herself two weeks to mull over the prospect of moving to such a remote place but finally was convinced by the force of her husband's enthusiasm. 'I knew his heart was set on it and had to trust his vision,' she explains, with the good grace of one who accepts the consequences of marrying an architect. ▶

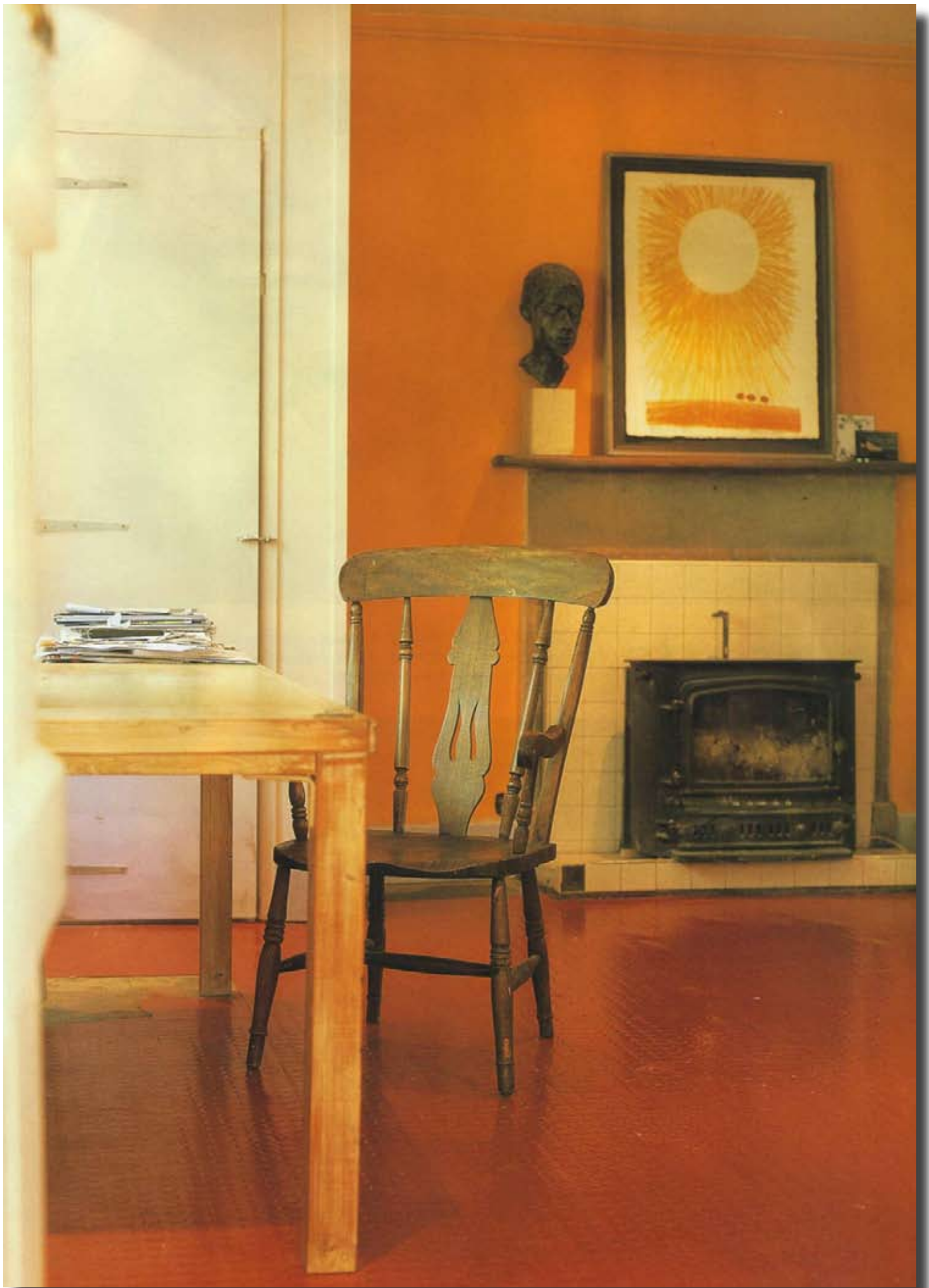


Opposite page, top, the glass walls reflect the natural setting; bottom, the kitchen/dining/ play room opens on to woodland on both sides. This page top left, the extension was built using a lightweight green oak frame; the 'shed', as it became known, was designed to be 'legible', clearly displaying its functionality; Piers, Archie, Sue and Lily on the deck



THE PUBLIC SIDE OF THE BUILDING IS FITTED WITH GREEN OAK LOUVRES TO RETAIN SOME PRIVACY

*This page, architect Piers trained in Australia and was keen to reproduce the kind of lightweight pavillion he had become used to there. **Opposite page**, the old gloomy kitchen has been converted into a cosy living room*



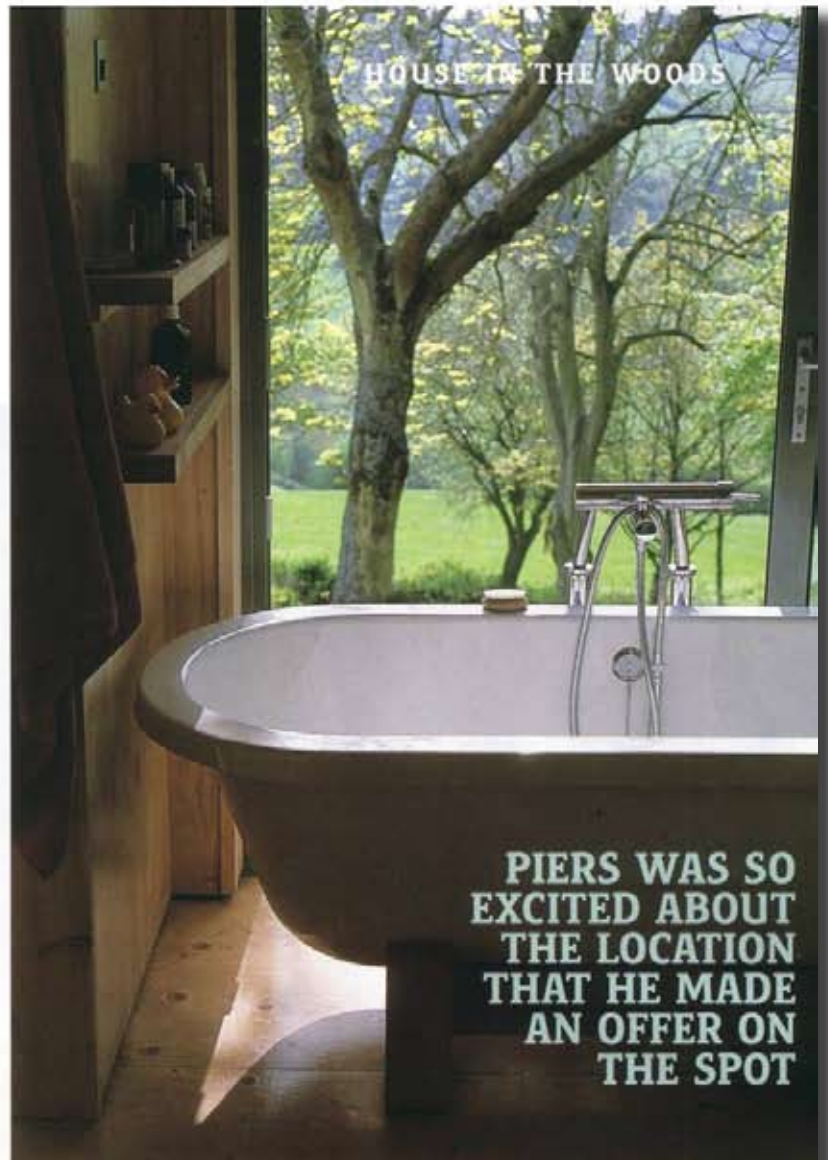
HOUSE IN THE WOODS

Piers had fallen for the view, rather than the existing building, so the move was destined to turn into a project. The house was dark, poky and, with just two bedrooms, too small for a growing family. It seemed to have been built in completely the wrong place as its orientation 'didn't address the light or the view'. Having trained as an architect in Australia, Piers was keen to design the type of contemporary, lightweight pavilion which he had grown accustomed to there. However, two years passed before they were ready to build anything at all.

Time spent in the existing house gave Piers and Sue a chance to formulate the ideal solution for the extension. 'At first we imagined that the ground floor would be a posh sitting room but gradually realised that the kitchen is the room we live in most and deserved the largest amount of space.' The whole ground floor of the new building was designed to be a kitchen/dining/play room. Upstairs in the new section, the 'big shed', there would be two bedrooms separated by a bathroom and a shower room with a dressing room and a child's bedroom in the adjoining upper level of the original building. Downstairs, the former sitting room would become a bathroom and separate guest bedroom doubling as a study. It was decided that the old, gloomy kitchen, equipped with a wood-burning stove, would work better as a cosy room to retreat to in the evening.

Planning was easily obtained as the house isn't in a conservation area and the clay soil indicated that any extension needed to be lightweight. Masonry was out of the question. The whole thing had to be designed with the tricky access in mind. Piers chose a green oak frame as he couldn't get the sections he required in any other wood. Pressure to start construction increased when the couple discovered they were expecting another child. Piers hired a contractor, rented a cottage for the family to live in, and promptly went on holiday.

His discovery, on his return, that the builder had not started work precipitated another significant life change: Piers decided ▶



PIERS WAS SO EXCITED ABOUT THE LOCATION THAT HE MADE AN OFFER ON THE SPOT

Clockwise from above, the view from the new bathroom; the master bedroom; the view out over the deck from the master bedroom. The location of the house gives it maximum privacy



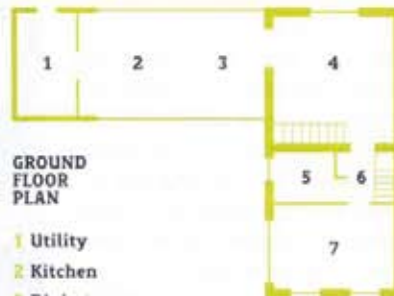
Piers contemplates the view from the dining/kitchen area on the ground floor of the extension



that the only way to complete the build was to take the project on himself. He left his job and set up his own architectural practice, not a decision he made lightly. 'I did catch myself sitting bolt upright in my sleep,' he says. Sue prepared herself for months of single parenthood and Piers swung into action. The date set for the frame to go up just happened to be Sue's due date for the next baby. Luckily Archie arrived a few days later than expected and, the frame installed, Piers was able to concentrate on getting some paid work.

The shed is a space dominated by what goes on beyond it. By opening up on both sides it engages immediately with the environment. Visually, Piers intended the structure to be completely 'legible'. 'You can see what's cladding, what's bracing and what's structure. Nothing is concealed.' Despite its remote position, Piers made sure that the public side of the building was fitted with green oak louvres to retain some privacy. On the opposite side, the modern exterior almost disappears, as the glass reflects the landscape.

It is hard to believe that the family only returned here six weeks ago. Before he found the site, Piers yearned to return to Australia but now claims that he will never move. Sue remains philosophical about trailing back and forth along the path with two small children in tow. 'It teaches you to be more organised and sometimes you just have to learn to improvise,' she says. Plus she has her eye on the 'undercroft', a space below the old house which, she is determined, will become her study. ■



GROUND FLOOR PLAN

- 1 Utility
- 2 Kitchen
- 3 Dining area
- 4 Living room
- 5 Bathroom
- 6 Stairs
- 7 Spare room

DIRECTORY

- Oak frame and louvres**
- Louis Maw** (01458 833 164)
- Structural engineering**
- Structures 1** (0117 945 9225)
- Industrial roofing and cladding**
- ABS Elbrow** (01454 316 655)
- Flooring**
- Avon Plywood** (0117 986 1383)
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